2.

Historical Background

We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse—
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

W. B. YEATS,
"Easter 1916"

Well, the last fire is trodden down,
Our dead are rotting fast in lime,
We all can sneak back into town,
Stravague about as in old time,

And stare at gaps of grey and blue
Where Lower Mount Street used to be,
And where flies hum round much we knew
For Abbey street and Eden Quay

And when the devil's made us wise
Each in his own peculiar hell
With desert hearts and drunken eyes

We're free to sentimentalize
By corners where the martyrs fell.

DERMOT O'BYRNE,
"A Dublin Ballad—1916"

Occasionally, a gifted sociologist such as Robert Nisbet is concerned about the relationship between sociology and history, but most sociologists are quite unconcerned about history. For them, society is conceived of as a giant Markov model in which all one needs to know of the past is contained in the present. When the typical American sociologist is told that the political party structure in the United States is, to a considerable extent, the result of three phenomena—the rural-urban difference at the time of the Revolutionary War, the North-South difference that produced the Civil War, and the influx of Catholic immigrant groups, particularly after 1830—he may observe that the information is interesting but of little pertinence for his analysis of the contemporary social structure of American politics.

Because of this disinterest in history, sociology has yet to develop the tools to enable it to judge how much of a group's historical past is relevant to its present situation. It is frequently asserted, for example, that the impact of slavery on the black family has contributed considerably to the problems of the black community today. Fortunately for this particular problem, Professor Herbert Gutman's as yet unpublished research demonstrates clearly that the black family was remarkably stable under slavery, and that if there has been any crisis in some black families, it was more the result of the Great Depression, the collapse of Southern agriculture, and massive migration to the North. Once again, however, one is faced with the problem of articulating and measuring such a possible relationship.

Similarly, one can assert, as Professor James Q. Wilson does, that the informal and roundabout style characteristic of Irish police sergeants may well be derived from the Penal times in Ireland (as may be that infuriating trait the Irish have of answering one question

with another[1]). This simply suggests that two types of behavior, one characteristic of ancestors and one of descendants, seem to have certain similarities, which is, at best, a very low level of argumentation. How valid is my argument that the persistent quest for respectability among the American Irish is a result of six centuries of second-class citizenship under the British occupation? What impact did the Famine have, not so much on the attitudes of the Irish who fled from it, but on their descendants who survived the Great Depression? It is not only impossible to answer such questions, it is difficult to know how to ask them.

I begin with the assumption that history is important, that the cultural, political, social, and economic experiences of the past tend to persist, and that the more we know of the history of an ethnic group the better we are able to understand its present situation. If one is unable to do more than speak of plausibilities and similarities between the past and the present, one is still in better shape for knowing something of the past than nothing. If my assumption that ethnic heritage is passed on through early childhood experiences of role expectations is correct, then the past is very important indeed.

How purely Celtic is the inheritance of the American Irish is an unanswerable question, for there were pre-Celtic groups in Ireland before the Celtic invaders appeared in the sixth century B.C., and many immigrant groups arrived periodically after that. The Danes, the Normans, the English all contributed bits to the Irishman-in-formation. G. K. Chesterton once remarked, "Some countries conquer other countries, the Irish conquered nations."

Historians are unable to separate out ethnic stocks very well; it is altogether possible that the Celtic clans made only a small contribution to the Irish gene pool. But the cultural context of the subsequent history of Ireland seems to have been established primarily by those interesting people who arrived in that heavily forested island some six centuries before Christ. When one reads contemporary descriptions of the Gaels, one is struck by how contemporaneous they sound. Stereotypes they may have been, but they are strikingly like current stereotypes.

1. Franklin Roosevelt is reported to have said to Mayor James Walker, "Jimmy, why do you Irish always answer a question by asking another?" To which Walker responded, "Do we, now?"

Thus a gentleman named Strabo, relying upon the work of a predecessor called Posidonius, says this of the Celts:

> To the frankness and high-spiritedness of their temperament must be added the traits of childish boastfulness and love of decoration. They wear ornaments of gold, torques on their necks, and bracelets on their arms and wrists, while people of high rank wear dyed garments besprinkled with gold. It is this vanity which makes them unbearable in victory and so completely downcast in defeat. In addition to their witlessness they possess a trait of barbarous savagery which is especially peculiar to the northern peoples, for when they are leaving the battle-field, they fasten to the necks of their horses the heads of their enemies, and on arriving home they nail up this spectacle at the entrances to their houses. Posidonius says that he saw this sight in many places, and was at first disgusted by it, but afterwards, becoming used to it, could bear it with equanimity.[2]

And Diodorus, apparently a student of Posidonius, too, has a few things to say about the culture of the Celtic inhabitants of Gaul.

> Physically the Gauls are terrifying in appearance, with deep-sounding and very harsh voices. In conversation they use few words and speak in riddles, for the most part hinting at things and leaving a great deal to be understood. They frequently exaggerate with the aim of extolling themselves and diminishing the status of others. They are boasters and threateners and given to bombastic self-dramatization, and yet they are quick of mind and with good natural ability for learning. They have also lyric poets whom they call Bards. They sing to the accompaniment of instruments resembling lyres, sometimes a eulogy and sometimes a satire. They have also certain philosophers and theologians who are treated with special honour, whom they call Druids.[3]

This stereotype sounds frighteningly familiar. Surely the Irish must have changed since the sixth century, B.C. If only Strabo and Dio-

2. Myles Dillon and Nora K. Chadwick, *The Celtic Realms* (New York: New American Library, 1967), p. 7.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

dorus didn't sound quite so much like Jimmy Breslin and Joe Flaherty!

The Celts, so far as we can figure out, began their expansion from Central Europe; and by the third century B.C. they held sway from Asia Minor to Scotland and Valencia. Although there was no central Celtic kingdom, there was a single culture which one of the experts described in terms that seem hauntingly modern:

> We are told that the Gauls were valiant, quarrelsome, cruel, superstitious and eloquent: their art also is full of contrasts. It is attractive and repellent; it is far from primitiveness and simplicity; it is refined in thought and technique, elaborate and clever, full of paradoxes, restless, puzzlingly ambiguous; rational and irrational; dark and uncanny—far from lovable humanity and transparence of Greek art. Yet it is a real style, the first great contribution by the barbarians to European art, the first great chapter in the everlasting contacts of southern, northern and eastern forces in the life of Europe.[4]

There are strong similarities between the culture of the Celts and Hindu India. Both apparently found their roots in Indo-European language and social structure. Celtic religion with its Brahmin-like class of Druids, Celtic legal structure, poetry, and family organization are similar enough to that of India to assume a common heritage.[5] Their religion, incidentally, was a fertility cult centering around the worship of the Earth Mother. As in India the Earth Mother was surrounded by a wide variety of colleagues and consorts. The Druids' sacred oath has a Hindu counterpart, and there is a common belief in immortality and reincarnation.

The Celts, then, were barbarians by Roman standards but eminently civilized by the standards of those who had preceded them in the plains and hills and marshes of Central Europe. They were no match for the Romans in organizational abilities or for the fierceness of the succeeding barbarian tribes. Under the pressure of Roman, Teutonic, and Gothic invasion the remnants of the Celts retreated to such extremities of Europe as Brittany, Wales,

4. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

the Isle of Man, the highlands of Scotland, and the forests and bogs of Ireland.

When I stand on Irish soil today, with most of the forests and bogs gone, I have the illusion that I am not in Europe. The faces around me are not European, they are American (at least from that part of America I know best). Even physically Ireland seems to be not of Europe. Such an impression may only be a trick of an imagination trained to expect leprechauns lurking around the next corner.

Quite apart from a romantic imagination, many of the cultural forces which shaped Western Europe were experienced not at all, or only slightly, by Ireland. Neither the Romans nor the Teutons ever got around to invading that country; nor were the Muslims a serious threat. Ireland, indeed, played a role in the Carolingian Renaissance, but as a sender of culture, not a receiver. Despite the conquest of parts of Ireland by some of the Norman knights of Henry II, those few made only a shallow imprint on Irish culture. The Crusades left Ireland untouched. There never was a unified kingdom under an absolute monarch, at least never one of native origin. As a matter of fact, the first national government that enjoyed both legitimacy and effectiveness was the Irish Free State government of the early 1920's, and it governed only part of Ireland. The Renaissance and the Enlightenment may have touched Dublin through the Anglo-Irish culture of men like Swift and Goldsmith, but Anglo-Irish was not Irish; and what happened in Dublin had little effect on the rest of the country. United Ireland and the Revolution of '98 was only a pale shadow of the French Revolution. The Act of Union afterwards effectively squelched the beginnings of industrial development everywhere except in Belfast. The Young Ireland Movement of 1848 had something in common with the other revolutionary movements of the same year, but it was very short-lived and, like all the other attempts, unsuccessful.

It is possible, of course, to make too much of this. Ireland is, in fact, a part of Europe. It was influenced by Christianity (though, as we shall see later, the Irish have always had their own particular brand of it—not infrequently disturbing to Rome). The

British occupation since the time of Henry II imposed upon the country a British version of European culture—including the language. The frequent and always unsuccessful alliances between the Irish and those other traditional enemies of the English, the French, have kept Ireland in contact with the French version of European culture. Thus the proclamation of the Easter Rising in 1916 was very much in debt to the ideology of the French Revolution as reflected through the United Irish Movement of '98 and the Young Ireland Movement of '48. Nevertheless, the standardized image of European political and cultural history that we acquired in our high school and college textbooks is a record of events which have little meaning or at least different meanings for Ireland than for either England or the continent. Ireland is Europe, all right, but either not quite or just barely.

THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM

One of the most striking themes of Irish history is the elusive quest for unity. Ancient Ireland was divided into some forty clans, each one of which occupied a bit of territory and was presided over by a king. These kings were organized into four kingdoms, Munster, Leinster, Connacht, and Ulster, and the four were presided over by a shadowy king with no power. Even the heads of the four kingdoms frequently had no control over what the lesser kings did. Without Roman influence—particularly their principle of territorial administration—clan rule, with its attendant disorder, feuding, and general chaos, continued unabated well into the Christian era. Apparently one of the reasons that Adrian IV "gave" Ireland to King Henry of England was that he believed Henry could reform the Irish Church so that bishops might become territorial rulers rather than be assigned to specific clans.

One has the impression when reading Irish history that the feuds among the kings and the clans were at least as important as resisting foreign invaders, and that despite frequent heroism and occasional military genius, the Irish propensity for doing battle with other Irishmen instead of with the enemy was very often responsible for

snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. Even the last of the Irish revolts in 1916 was begun with a split in the revolutionary forces. One faction, led by Owen MacNeill, refused at the last minute to join in the seizure of the General Post Office by Pierce and Conway, thereby assuring a military defeat of the Easter Rising despite the symbolic victory.

But the Irish never stopped rebelling. Adrian IV, good English pope that he was, presented Ireland to Henry II in 1156, and conquest in earnest began in 1170. English-Norman rule never really penetrated too deeply into the culture or structure of Irish life. The Normans themselves were rather quickly assimilated. At the end of the Middle Ages, with the accession of the Tudors in England, a more determined attempt was made to bring Ireland under control—an attempt which went on for 450 years before the English finally gave it up as a bad job.

The first revolt was that of Silken Thomas, the Earl of Kildare, in 1537; it was followed by the revolt of Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, in 1595. The Rebellion of 1641 was followed by that of Owen Roe O'Neill in 1649 and that of Patrick Sarsfield in 1689. Ireland was free of rebellion for another century, but then there came Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen in 1798 and Robert Emmet in 1803. During the Famine there was the Young Ireland rising of 1848 and after it the Fenian rising of 1867. The final chapter began on Easter Monday in 1916 with the seizure of the General Post Office, final, that is to say, if one forgets about Ulster, that province where Bernadette Devlin and the Provisional IRA act to keep up the tradition of rebellion.

Nor were these rebellions mere scuffles in the street. On the contrary, especially after the Reformation they became bloody, total wars in which reprisals and counterreprisals, atrocities and counter-atrocities were almost taken for granted. Oliver Cromwell can easily be described as the first practitioner of genocide in modern history. In the decade of Cromwell's invasion more than half the population of Ireland died—about three-quarters of a million people, somewhat less, be it noted, than the number that died in the Great Famine two centuries later.

Rebellion, atrocity, repression, misery, famine, penal legislation, sullen resentment, and then a whole new cycle all over again: this was the history of Ireland for at least half a millennium.

The English tried all kinds of strategies to bring the rebellious Irish subjects under control. Early on they dealt with the native chieftains. In the early centuries of occupation, an Irish parliament was allowed to exist under control of the British Crown. Then Cromwell and succeeding British kings (with the exception of the brief reign of Catholic King James II) systematically reduced the Catholic population to abject misery by massive land grabs used to reward English supporters and to establish a Protestant aristocracy in Ireland friendly to English policy. These "Anglo-Irish," in control of the Irish parliament in Dublin, passed a series of "Penal Laws" designed to further degrade the indigenous Catholic population by excluding them from all the political and social benefits of organized society, that is, education, political representation, religious expression, ownership of property. Finally, in 1800, an Irish Parliament, representing only the Protestant segment of the country and which still had to be bribed into submission, agreed to the permanent union of the two countries. The parliament in Dublin was dissolved and abolished to be integrated into the one at Westminster.

In the nineteenth century, particularly under the leadership of Gladstone, the policy was reversed. Penal Laws were gradually repealed, home-rule legislation was pushed (though not passed until 1914 and then suspended), and Irish peasants were given increased rights over their land and eventually accorded something like ownership in the 1880's. So satisfied were the English with the land reform and the consequent relative prosperity for the Irish peasant that they were astonished when the Irish still insisted on rebelling in the first part of the twentieth century. King George V, a humane and sympathetic man, was absolutely astonished at the Easter Rising, because he thought land reform had permanently settled "the Irish question."

But the Irish question was, of course, insoluble, for the English were absolutely convinced that their rule of Ireland was legitimate both legally and morally, and the Irish were equally convinced that

it was both legally and morally illegitimate. Nicholas Mansergh summarizes it:

> The English invasions of Ireland were unending because the conquest was never complete. And all the while through the long years of adversity, pressure from without was consolidating within a core of resistance to the invader, which depended in the last resort, not upon destructible material forces, but upon a slowly maturing and finally indestructible conviction that Ireland should and would be free. Resistance and rebellion were always unavailing, for a poverty-stricken and ill-disciplined people, whose distaste for compromise left them disunited in many crises, could not hope successfully to challenge the resources of an island power whose heritage was the dominion of the sea. Yet in as much as manifestations of the will to resist kept alive the spirit of resistance, they were not barren of result. While the sporadic rebellions were wasteful of lives that could ill be spared, it may well be that nationalist historians are right in saying that, by such sacrifices alone, was Ireland enabled to nourish a tradition so vivid, so emotional, so fanatical as to resist the miasmata of failure and despair. . . . [T]he English rulers of Ireland, having failed while yet there was time to take the measures necessary to conciliate a not-unfriendly people, were confronted at the last by an Irish ideal which, alien to their outlook yet fostered by their misrule, was to prove a source of strength more resilient, because it was more single-minded, than any which a great Empire could command.[6]

How explain the rebelliousness of the Irish? H. B. C. Pollard, an English police chief in Ireland during the Civil War, caricaturized only somewhat the fundamental English Protestant conviction that Irish Catholics were an inferior breed.

> Whether revolutionaries are aware of it or not, their morbid discontent with existing society, and their perfect willingness to embark on a course of action which will bring death and ruin to thousands, and even to themselves, in pursuit of a grand experiment or an inner vision, is not a wonderful self-sacrifice but merely a perverted form of self-gratification. The

6. Nicholas Mansergh, *The Irish Question 1840–1921* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), pp. 20–21.

communist who talks glibly of shooting down the bourgeoisie is gratifying a perverted instinct with the prospect of a wholesale blood bath. The visionary who rushes to martyrdom for a cause gratifies once and for ever his masochistic propensity.

It has been said that the Irish derive keen pleasure from the woes with which they cause themselves to be afflicted; and pleasure in pain is typical—significantly typical—of many of the conditions which I have outlined above. And when it is understood in its true bearing on the psychology of revolution and of revolutionaries, it must destroy the fine illusions and the glamour that, to some minds, hung about the leaders of "the murder gangs." There is nothing particularly fine about a group of moral decadents leading a superstitious minority into an epidemic of murder and violent crime; yet this is what has happened of recent years in Ireland, it is what has happened time and again in the past, and it is what will happen again in the future; for the Irish problem is a problem of the Irish *race,* and is neither a by-product of politics nor of environment, but is rooted in the racial characteristics of the people themselves.[7]

The cycle of revolt, strife, and depression was such that culture, learning, science, and technology had little opportunity to develop in Ireland. Unquestionably there was a great culture centered mostly in the monasteries between the time of St. Patrick and the invasion of the Danes in the ninth century, and there always was a folk culture; but generation after generation of Catholic aristocracy was either destroyed in battle or fled the country in the wake of unsuccessful rebellion. The Protestant aristocracy (in later days called "the Ascendency"), however cultivated it may have been on occasion, had little influence on the rest of the country. Only in Belfast was there any industrial development, and the Act of Union cut short the economic and industrial development beginning in the south of Ireland. The Penal Laws and the persecution of Catholics, the repeated famines, the devotion of the best resources of the most gifted people to rebellion, all of these factors

7. H. B. C. Pollard, *Secret Societies of Ireland* (London: Philip Allan and Co., 1922).

guaranteed that Ireland would exist in a state of disorganized chaos while most of the rest of Europe was making an eventful entry into the modern world.

The myth of the slovenly, irresponsible, happy-go-lucky, and carefree Irish has caused most of us to assume that Ireland really did not have what it took to become a successful modern industrial nation. The Irish were too busy with their dreams and their drink, with their poetry and their feuding to ever become an effective modern state.

What this stereotype overlooks is the fact that the Irish who migrated to the United States yielded nothing to anybody—save perhaps the Jews—in their orientation towards achievement, and the Irish Republic, for all its problems, has been one of the most successful revolutionary countries of the twentieth century.

There are two important points that need to be made about the Republic. First of all, despite the intense factionalization of the period before the establishment of the Irish Republic, true democratic principles were established and maintained by the new government. The pro–Free State faction, led by William Cosgrave, accepted dominion status with Britain and finally prevailed over the anti–Free State faction led by Eamon de Valera. During the Civil War these two factions killed each other off in much greater numbers than the English had, yet de Valera and Cosgrave proved sufficiently adroit as politicians to keep extremists in line and to build a civilized and responsible democratic system. The present prime minister, John Lynch, continues that tradition of political astuteness by his adamant refusal to get involved in the Ulster conflict.

Michael Collins and the IRA defeated the British in the Black and Tan War through the tactics of terror, and the IRA has never abondoned those tactics in the half-century since 1921. The present war in Ulster continues the tactics of fifty years ago. Ironically, the IRA was probably responsible for Collins' death when he agreed to the compromise of the Irish Free State and the partition of the island. In the bloody civil war that followed, the "Free Staters" and the IRA killed each other with as much enthusiasm

as they had previously displayed against the Black and Tans. In the middle 1920s, "Dev," who had been allied with the IRA, decided that he could accomplish by electoral politics what the IRA could not accomplish by force of arms. He broke with the IRA, took the "oath" (with a mental reservation that only an Irishman could understand), and proceeded to end most of the ties with England that the IRA found objectionable.[8]

The uneasy truce between the "legion of the rearguard" and "Dev" was finally broken, and the IRA turned once again to its tactics of guerrilla terror, even though it ought to have been clear that it was not 1916 and that they did not have the active sympathy of most Irishmen. For four decades the IRA continued to struggle, raiding Ulster police posts, stealing large supplies of guns, bombing buildings, and robbing banks in both England and Ulster. The failure of the Ulster and British governments to respond to moderate Catholic elements in Ulster (such as those represented by Bernadette Devlin who, for all her socialist rhetoric, is hardly a terrorist) gave the IRA a new lease on life.

J. Bowyer Bell traces in meticulous detail the persistence of the IRA and makes two general conclusions:

> 1. Even though its tactics lost all hope of effectiveness fifty years ago, the IRA has stubbornly persisted in the style of the Easter Rising and the Black and Tan War.
> 2. No defeat, however shattering, has prevented the IRA from returning to the battle.

Bell is impressed with their persistence if not with their flexibility:

> What is special about the IRA is not the errors and defeats, which are legion, or the old successes, which are splendid; but the continuity, however futile such persistence may seem to the rational. Scorned or discounted, the IRA continues. Che Guevaras come and go, EOKA or FLOSY win or lose, the Irgun disappears or the Mau Mau is crushed or the Hungarian Freedom Fighters go into exile and the Algerians into office;

8. Thus earning a reputation for "cuteness," by which is meant not attractiveness but deviousness. Prime Minister Lynch is also said to be "cute."

> but the IRA remained—generation after generation, dedicated to Tone, to physical force, and to the Ultimate Republic.[9]

Bell thinks this is admirable, and perhaps it is. Joe Cahill, the gentle-faced, soft-spoken killer with the cap, whom the U.S. Immigration Service would not permit into the country, is the lineal descendent of Michael Collins, and his calm discussion of the necessity of killing British soldiers is part of a half-century tradition.

Horrifying? I suppose it depends on one's tastes. I do not find Cahill or the IRA attractive, but then I have never lived under oppression. And I note that many of those Americans who are so ready to denounce the folly of the "outlawed Irish Republican Army" seem quite sympathetic to the Panthers, the Blackstone Rangers, Huey Newton, and Eldridge Cleaver. Would Leonard Bernstein have had a party for Joe Cahill?

However violent the IRA, it still can be said that, with the possible exception of India, Ireland is the only revolutionary country of the twentieth century that has been able to permit political opposition. More than that, when de Valera finally ousted Cosgrave in an election, the event was, so far as I know, the only time in modern history that a revolutionary government has been pushed from power by a peaceful, democratic election. De Valera's party has remained in control for most of the last four decades. However, on two occasions the opposition party has formed governments, and once, in a paradoxical twist that only the Irish could accomplish, the Fine Gael, the legitimate successor of the Free State party, proclaimed the existence of the Republic of Ireland, something which de Valera, ardent republican that he was and is, never quite managed.

It may well be argued that the Irish learned the skills of parliamentary democracy in the 120 years during which Irish representatives connived and obstructed the Union Parliament at Westminster. They also acquired from their British conquerors the techniques of running the civilized and legally restricted governmental structure. One can only say that for a country that had seen so much strife

9. J. Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army—the IRA, 1916–1970* (New York: John Day, 1971), p. 378.

and violence, the Irish learned very quickly how to run a law-abiding, responsible democracy.

Secondly, much to the surprise of everyone, and almost without anyone noticing, the Irish Republic in the last decade seems to have actually solved its economic problems and begun an era of prosperity. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Sean Lemass and T. K. Whitaker of the Department of Finance, the Republic instituted an essentially Keynesian five-year economic plan that was fantastically successful. Oliver MacDonagh summarizes the results of the efforts of Whitaker and Lemass:

> The success of the first program astonished friend and foe alike. The growth rate of 1959–64, the period of the first program, was 4 instead of 2 per cent. In the same years, the GNP rose by nearly 25 per cent and exports by more than 40 per cent. Investment was almost doubled, despite the fact that savings also increased. The social revolution was no less dramatic. The population of the Republic had fallen, in an almost unbroken line from 6.5 million in 1851 to 2.8 million in 1961. But in 1961–66 it actually increased by 2.3 per cent, while the net emigration dropped to 16,000, about one-third of the level of the preceding decade. Still more significant was the change in the structure of the population revealed by the census of 1966. The largest increase was in the 20–24 age group, which had grown by nearly 25 per cent. The 10–14 and 15–19 groups also showed remarkable increases. In effect, this meant, if current trends continued, that the proportion of those reaching maturity who would be absorbed in the Republic was 75 per cent, not far short of double the proportion who remained at home in the years 1950–59. Moreover, the marriage rate was bound to change dramatically. The extraordinarily low rate of 5.5 per thousand, a long-established factor in Irish society, would probably increase by 2.0 per thousand in the coming decade. The renewal of life and hope might be discerned even in the face of the country. Not merely in the urban areas as a whole, but also in no less than a quarter of the countryside, the population increased by over 7 per cent in 1961–66. In the remaining rural areas, the decline was reduced to 4 per cent, a no less remarkable achievement. The fundamental explanation was industrial growth, planned development radiating outward from the selected centers, and the systematic reorganization of agriculture and tourism. In few other Western nations would these statistics seem even especially encouraging, but in the Republic they proclaimed a "miracle."[10]

The second five-year plan is apparently as successful as the first. One need only try to find a parking place in Dublin today to realize that the assets and liabilities of economic progress have come to Ireland. Irish scholars tell me that there are a number of reasons for the success of the five-year plan. Whitaker and his staff apparently are brilliant economists. Lemass, though a participant in the Easter Rising, was capable of looking forward to economic growth instead of backward to the heroics of the quarrels at the time of "the trouble" and the Civil War. In addition to the economic and political correlates of prosperity, my Irish friends tell me, there was also a shift in the morale of the Irish people. For the first time they began to believe that economic progress was possible for their country, and that they, the Irish, could practice the skills of the modern industrial and financial world with as much intelligence and proficiency as anyone else. The tragic figure of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, I am informed, played an important part in the resurgence of Irish confidence. "If he could make it, why can't we?" was apparently a widespread attitude in Ireland during the first five-year plan. Oddly enough, Kennedy may have been more important to the Irish Irish than to the American Irish, since the latter had no doubt about their abilities to make money.

Ireland was part of the first generation of modern revolutionary countries, along with Turkey and Mexico. It can be said with no exaggeration that Ireland was the most successful of the revolutionary nations. Unlike the others, it did not have a population problem, owing to that peculiar method of birth control, the late marriage, and the fact that its surplus population could migrate to England and the United States. Nevertheless, the ability of the Irish Republic to produce political democracy and economic prosperity in a relatively short period of time after independence suggests that Ireland could have been one of the great and strong

10. Oliver MacDonagh, *Ireland* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 133.

nations of the modern world if it had achieved its freedom, say, one hundred years earlier. The question is, of course, academic, but it still must be conceded that tranquility and prosperity (along with, it must be confessed, a certain dullness) came rather quickly and almost rather anticlimactically after a half-millennium of strife and misery.

It also must be remembered that the American Irish fled, most of them, for their lives from a nation that had been under oppression for almost a thousand years. They had virtually no political or legal rights; abject poverty was a matter of course for them, and conflict and rebellion were endemic, and education and industrial development was effectively prohibited. The very fact that they were Irish Catholic meant they were marked as permanently inferior. The cultural traditions of their past, including their language, were systematically extirpated, and their most gifted leaders were hanged, shot, imprisoned, or exiled. The memories of these events may have faded from the minds of the American Irish. (Which of my American Irish readers, for example, ever even heard of Owen Roe O'Neill, and how many know what happened to Parnell, or how many are aware that there was another Michael Collins besides the astronaut?) The results of such a tragic heritage are not easily eliminated. To lament, as some Catholic self-critics have, that the Irish in the United States have not produced as impressive a cultural and intellectual community as the Jews, let us say, is to forget completely what the history of Ireland has been since that generous English pope presented it to his friend Henry II. What ought to be surprising about the American Irish is not that they have not been quite as socially and financially successful as the Jews, but that they have been successful at all. And what is astonishing is not that their intellectual and cultural contributions are limited, but that they have any time for the arts at all. Nor is it surprising that the Irish political style is pragmatic and suspicious of ideology; under the circumstances, it is astonishing that there is enough trust remaining from their heritage that they are capable of politics at all.

There are four aspects of the Irish experience that have had a special influence on the American Irish. They are the Gaelic past,

the Catholic religion, the Penal Laws, and the Great Famine. We shall postpone for the next two chapters the subjects of Catholicism and the Celtic heritage and conclude this chapter with some comments on the impact of the Penal Laws and the Famine.

THE PENAL LAWS

The Penal Laws began in Elizabethan times, were reinforced during the reign of Cromwell, and developed to their fullest after the triumph of William of Orange at the Battle of Boyne in 1691. They represent the most savage, the most repressive legislation that the modern world has ever seen. The land of Ireland was confiscated from the Catholics. Between the time of Elizabeth I and William of Orange, the British government took twelve million acres out of a total of fifteen million cultivatable acres in Ireland. Catholics, four-fifths of the population, owned one-seventh of the land.

In the early 1700's the most repressive of the Penal Laws were enacted. All priests were required to register their names and their parishes under penalty of being branded with a red-hot iron; they were required then to swear allegiance to the House of Stuart or suffer banishment. Unregistered priests were to be castrated, though the London government refused to go along with this extreme form of barbarism. In 1719 all bishops were banished from Ireland under penalty of being hanged, drawn, and quartered; friars and monks were also banished. Public crosses, which were widely venerated by the Irish people, were destroyed. Catholic chapels were not permitted to have belfries, towers, or steeples. Catholic pilgrimages were banned under pain of flogging. Catholics were forbidden to sit in Parliament, to vote for members of Parliament, or to be members of grand juries (the local government bodies). They were forbidden to send their children abroad for education or to have schools of their own. A reward of ten pounds was promised for the apprehension of Catholic schoolmasters. Education at Trinity College in Dublin was reserved for Protestants. Catholics were forbidden to marry Protestants, and death was decreed for any priest who performed such a marriage. All marriages were

civilly invalid unless they were performed by a minister of the Church of Ireland. Catholics were excluded from the legal profession; they could be neither barristers, nor solicitors, nor magistrates, nor judges. They could not be members of municipal corporations. They could not serve in the army or the navy; they could not bear arms; they could not wear swords on ceremonial occasions. They could not own a horse worth more than five pounds; any Protestant seeing a Catholic with a more valuable horse could compel him to sell it for five pounds. Catholics might not acquire land from Protestants; a Catholic landowner could not deed his estate as a whole; no Catholic could hold a lease for more than thirty years, but a Catholic who became a Protestant could inherit his father's whole estate. Lord Chancellor Bowes summarized the whole thing beautifully when he said, "The law does not suppose any such person to exist as an Irish Roman Catholic." His successor, John Fitzgibbon, the Earl of Clare, called Catholics "the scum of the earth." Wolfe Tone, the Protestant revolutionary, described the Penal Laws as "that execrable and infamous code, framed with the art and the malice of demons, to plunder and degrade and brutalize the Catholics."

Dean Swift, no lover of the Catholics by any means, commented, "The rise of our rents is squeezed out of the very blood, and vitals, and clothes, and dwellings of the tenants, who live worse than English beggars." Bishop George Berkeley commented that the Irish peasant was "more destitute than savages, and more abject than negroes. . . . The very savages of America are better clad and better lodged than the Irish cottagers throughout the fertile counties of Limerick and Tipperary."

There was no restraint of any sort on the landlords' power to get the highest rents possible. Resulting from the increase of population, the shortage of land was acute, and rents constantly moved up. Even though he paid his rent, the peasant had no guarantee against eviction to make room for another willing to pay more. As much as they hated the "rack-renting," they hated the tithes even more. The peasants' tithes provided vast sums of money for the Protestant Church of Ireland, which served very few people. In 1753, for example, out of sixty-seven Protestant parishes in

County Clare, sixty-two had no Protestant church and most had no parson or curate; nonetheless, the peasants contributed to the support of those parishes.

There were still more Penal Laws. No Catholic was permitted to have more than two apprentices. No Catholic was permitted to manufacture or sell books or newspapers, or to grant mortgages. No Catholic priest, even if he was registered, was allowed to move one step outside his parish. A Catholic wife who became a Protestant was permitted to live apart from her husband and make him support her. Catholic orphans were brought up as Protestants. Protestants were forbidden to take Catholic apprentices. A Protestant landowner lost his civil rights if he married a Catholic, and a Protestant heiress who married a Catholic forfeited her inheritance.

Writing in 1780, Arthur Young observed:

> The cottages of the Irish, which are all called cabbins, are the most miserable looking hovels that can well be conceived. . . . A landlord in Ireland can scarcely invent an order which a servant, labourer, or cottier dares to refuse to execute. . . . Disrespect, or anything tending towards sauciness, he may punish with his cane or his horsewhip with the most perfect security. A poor man would have his bones broken if he offered to lift a hand in his own defense.[11]

And Edward Wakefield noted, "Landlords of consequence have assured me that many of their cottier's would think themselves honoured to have their wives and daughters sent for to the bed of their master—a mark of slavery which proves the oppression under which such people must live."[12]

In other words, the state of the Irish in the 1700s was not very much different from that of the slaves in the southern part of the United States at the same time. The survival of the Irish under such circumstances is quite surprising. They must have astonished their British and Anglo-Irish overlords, who thought that the "Final Solution" to the Irish problem shouldn't have taken so long.

11. Giovanni Costigan, *A History of Modern Ireland* (New York: Pegasus, paperback, 1970), p. 94.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Interestingly enough, much of the Penal legislation also affected the Ulster Presbyterians, who were as ready to join revolts as their Irish Catholic enemies well into the nineteenth century. The rising of the United Irishmen in 1798, for example, was a truly national affair, with the Presbyterian farmers of the North, the Catholic peasants of the South led by their priests, and the Anglo-Protestant disciples of the French Revolution, such as Wolfe Tone in Dublin, banding together in common cause against England. By the late nineteenth century, however, while the alliance between the left-wing Protestants and the southern Catholics continued, the Ulster Presbyterians had opted out of the coalition.

There are many different ways to survive under such a repressive regime. The Irish Catholics, like the blacks of the American South, proved adept at developing modes of accommodation while retaining an independence of spirit. The aforementioned propensity of the Irish to answer a question by asking one, is most likely a product of the Penal times. It is plausible that the informal, roundabout, casual, and frequently implicit and unspoken Irish political style is a legacy from those Penal times, too. The fundamental distrust of official structures and disregard for official laws that allegedly characterizes so many Irish politicians (and which unquestionably, in fact, has characterized such worthies as Mayor Hague and Alderman Prendergast) likewise may be traced to behavior patterns acquired during the Penal time. So, since both the law and the Establishment are out to get you, the best thing to do is get them first.

Many of the Penal Laws were unenforceable, and no serious attempts were made to enforce others. Nevertheless, the Irish Catholics spent their lives in a country where it was presumed that they had no right to exist.

While there were no organized revolts between the enactment of the Penal Laws at the beginning of the 1700s and "the '98," there was, nonetheless, "agrarian revolt," as Irish Catholic vigilante groups rose up to protect what little was left to their countrymen. The Whiteboys began as a protest against tithing; the Oakboys against forced labor on the roads; the Steelboys to fight against evictions; and after them came the Ridgeboys, the Peep o'Day

Boys, the Thrashers, Caravats, Shanavests, Rockites, Ribbonmen, and the Defenders. Most of these secret vigilante groups were relatively harmless. Few people were killed, but houses were destroyed, hayracks burned, and cattle killed. Since these groups were secret societies, they were officially condemned by the Catholic Church; members were excommunicated, though it is unlikely that the parish priests were very opposed to their activities. The Molly Maguires, who appeared in the coal fields of West Virginia, must certainly be viewed as an adaptation on the American scene of the Whiteboys and similar groups of the eighteenth century.

A final means of adaptation to the Penal Laws was emigration to France and Spain to fight in the army and to America to begin a new life. Those most likely to migrate to America before 1800, however, were not Irish Catholics but Ulstermen, who disliked the Anglican ascendency in Dublin as much as the Catholics. Perhaps as many as a half-million "Scots-Irish" migrated to the United States and became an implacable enemy to British rule in the colonies. Interestingly enough, these Ulster migrants defined themselves as Irish, and used the term "Scots-Irish" (which was given to them by others in America) only to distinguish themselves from the "Famine Irish" who came after 1848. Also, in this pre-revolutionary migration were some south-of-Ireland Protestants, mostly of Celtic rather than Anglo-Saxon ancestry. Most of them were shopkeepers and artisans who had become Protestants during the Penal years; they were probably in good enough financial condition to attempt migration during the famines of the eighteenth century. Periodically, the Irish Catholic leadership lamented the fact that the Protestants, be they Ulstermen or converts, were better able to take advantage of the opportunity to migrate than the Irish Catholics; but of course they also had more opportunity to develop the self-confidence necessary even to begin to think about changing their situation than did the oppressed and miserable Irish Catholics. It was only the incredible crisis of the Great Famine that forced migration on many of them as the only alternative to death. Beginning with the campaign of Daniel O'Connell and the resultant first Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, the British government slowly

and reluctantly repealed the Penal Laws, though it was only with the Wyndham Act of 1903 that the last disabilities against Irish Catholic land ownership were eliminated. A measure of the reluctance of the British government to remove the penal legislation was that the price set for Catholic emancipation in 1829 was that O'Connell agree that the property qualification for voting be raised from forty shillings to ten pounds. Potential Catholic voters were thereby reduced from 200,000 to less than 10 per cent of that. With such a history of extreme repression, it is indeed surprising not that the Irish hated the English, but that after their final liberation in the 1920s the hatred died so quickly. While it is presumably unwise to say so publicly in modern Ireland, an occasional Irishman will lament the fact that the British made such an absolute mess of the Union of 1800. Some sort of federation of independent states in the British Isles might have made a good deal of economic, social, and political sense, of benefit to all concerned. But both the Anglo-Irish ascendency in Dublin and the British public and government in London were absolutely assured of the moral and religious superiority of Protestant rule; that freedom be given to Irish Catholics was as inconceivable from Dublin Castle to Westminster to the English voter as freedom for blacks was inconceivable in the American South.

Among the more interesting phenomena of Penal Ireland were the "hedge schools," illegal and informal schools in which teachers and students met, frequently out of doors, so that some sort of education would be imparted to Irish Catholic children. The hierarchy, clergy, and laity of Ireland feared that the official school system was nothing more than an attempt on the part of the Ascendency to convert the children of Irish Catholics. This unquestionably helped to shape the mentality that led to a separate parochial school system in the United States.

There were three basic strains that characterized the Irish nationalist organizations in the nineteenth century after Daniel O'Connell: the parliamentary group, seeking constitutional home rule towards the end of the century under the leadership of Charles Parnell; the land reformers, such as Michael Davitt's Land League; and the secret revolutionary organizations, such as the Fenians and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). These groups sometimes cooperated and sometimes squabbled with one another. The Sinn Fein, which was the political base of the revolt of 1916–23, stood somewhere between Parnell on the one hand and the IRB on the other. The founder of the Sinn Fein, Arthur Griffith, conceived of the union of Ireland and Great Britain much like the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary. But, after the events of the Easter Rising, the Sinn Fein and the Irish Volunteers became the Irish Republican Army and were swept irresistibly toward open revolt. The IRB, a small, secret society, had written the scenario for revolt before 1900, and the stupidity of the British government in thinking that land reform would ultimately placate the militant minority that the IRB represented seems, in retrospect, quite incredible. Even more stupid, however, was the bloody suppression of the Easter Rising of 1916, which drove the overwhelming majority of the Irish people, who had in the relative prosperity of the first decade-and-a-half of the twentieth century little taste for armed revolt, into the arms of the IRB. These events, stirring, complicated, tragic, and often futile, took place in Ireland after the immigrants had arrived on the shores of the United States. As a matter of fact, one can say that instead of being shaped by the post-Famine political events, the American Irish helped shaped the events. Without the financial and political support of the American Irish, it is questionable whether the revolt which began in 1916 would have been successful. Eamon de Valera, after all, was born in Brooklyn.

THE FAMINE

The Easter Rising was a failure that became a success because the British military government under the incredibly inept General Maxwell executed a handful of the leaders of the revolution. Perhaps a legal case could have been made for these killings, but no legal case will excuse the British government from the deaths of millions of Irish Catholics from the famines at the time of Cromwell

to those in the middle of the nineteenth century. As we have already noted, perhaps three-quarters of a million Catholics died in the famine of the middle seventeenth century; 1741 was called by the Irish "the year of the slaughter," with over 400,000 deaths from famine. But these were minor events compared to the Great Famine at the end of the 1840s. In 1841 the population of Ireland was over eight million; by 1851, at the normal rate of increase, it should have been over nine million; in fact, it was only 6.5 million. In the space of a decade Ireland lost 2.5 million people, probably less than half by migration. In other words, between 1847 and 1850 somewhere between one million and 1.5 million Irish Catholics died while the British government barely lifted a finger to save them. Indeed, it continued to export agricultural products from Ireland and to clear tenants off the land. The Potato Famine, then, was one of the great disasters of modern Western Europe.

It is estimated that the population of Ireland was about four million in 1800, which meant that in the years between 1800 and 1840 the population had more than doubled, and some British observers described Ireland as the most densely populated country in Europe. These people lived always on the edge of famine, depending on the success of one highly unpredictable crop, the potato, for their existence. When the crop prospered, there was work and food aplenty (or at least enough); but when it failed, disaster was almost inevitable. The British government did not create the blight that destroyed the potato crop in the 1840s, certainly, but it did force upon Ireland the kind of political and economic subjection that made some sort of disaster practically inevitable.

The state of pre-Famine Ireland was described sympathetically by three Frenchmen: Gustave de Beaumont and his friend, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Duvergier de Hauranne.

De Beaumont:

> I have seen the Indian in his forests and the Negro in his chains, and thought, as I contemplated their pitiable condition, that I saw the very extreme of human wretchedness; but I did not then know the condition of unfortunate Ireland. There is no doubt that the most miserable of English paupers is better fed and clothed than the most prosperous of Irish laborers.

De Tocqueville remarked that the wrongs done the people in Clare are retained "with a terrifying exactitude of local memory."

> Whatever one does, the memory of the great persecutions is not forgotten. Who sows injustice must sooner or later reap the fruits. . . . All the rich Protestants whom I saw in Dublin speak of the Catholics with extraordinary hatred and scorn. The latter, they say, are savages . . . and fanatics led into all sorts of disorders by their priests.

Duvergier de Hauranne wrote that there were in Ireland "two nations," the conquerors and the conquered.

> There is nothing between the master and the slave, between the cabin and the palace. There is nothing between all the luxuries of existence and the last degree of human wretchedness.[13]

The fact that there existed within Ireland two nations, one the oppressor and the other oppressed, is clear when one ponders that between 1845 and 1850, when more than a million Irishmen were dying, two million quarters of wheat a year were shipped out of Ireland. In the Poor Law Act of 1847 it was stipulated that no peasant with a holding of a quarter-acre or more was eligible for relief—thus forcing people to sell their land. Lord John Russell, the Prime Minister of England, responding to an appeal from Lord Clarendon, Viceroy in Ireland, wrote: "The state of Ireland for the next few months must be one of great suffering. Unhappily the agitation for Repeal [of the Penal Laws] has contrived to destroy nearly all sympathy in this country." Later, Clarendon told Russell, "I don't think there is another legislature in Europe that would disregard such suffering as now exists in the west of Ireland, or coldly persist in the policy of extermination."

The permanent head of the Treasury, Sir Charles Trevelyan, observed smugly: "The poorest and most ignorant Irish peasant

13. The three Frenchmen are quoted in Costigan, *op. cit.*, pp. 91, 103, 105.

must, I think, by this time have become sensible of the advantage of belonging to a powerful community like that of the United Kingdom, the establishments and pecuniary resources of which are at all times ready to be employed for his benefit." At another point he wrote, "The Irish problem [referring to overpopulation] being altogether beyond the power of man, the cure had been applied by the direct stroke of an all-wise Providence in a manner as unexpected and as unthought of as it is likely to be effectual." Finally, when a million people were dead, Sir Charles was moved to some compassion: "It is hard upon the poor people that they should be deprived of knowing that they are suffering from an affliction of God's providence."

Sir Charles Wood, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Trevelyan's boss wrote to an Irish landlord: "I am not at all appalled by your tenantry going. That seems to me a necessary part of the process. . . . We must not complain of what we really want to obtain." And Sir Robert Peel benignly observed, "The time has come when it is not any longer necessary to pet Ireland. We only spoil her by undeserved flattery and by treating her to everything for which she herself ought to pay." Nassau Senior, Professor of Economics at Oxford, on whom the governmental leaders depended for economic advice, was quoted as saying that he feared the famine of 1848 would not kill more than a million people, and that would scarcely be enough to do much good. The London *Times* rejoiced at the thought that soon the native Irishman would be "as rare on the banks of the Liffey as a red man on the banks of the Manhatten."

Sir Charles Trevelyan, always eager to see things from the moral point of view, reflected, "The great evil with which we have to contend is not the physical evil of the famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people."

All through the Famine, according to Cecil Woodham-Smith, cartoons were published "week after week depicting the Irishman as a filthy, brutal creature, an assassin and a murderer, begging for money, under a pretence of buying food, to spend on weapons."

And Lord Tennyson, that darling of Victorian poetry, commented, "The Kelts are all made furious fools. They live in a horrible island and have no history of their own worth the least

notice. Could not anyone blow up that horrible island with dynamite and carry it off in pieces—a long way off?"[14]

The island was not carried a long way off, but many of its people were; and not all of them made it safely to other shores. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, died either on the passage from Ireland or shortly after arriving in the New World. At Grosse Isle, near Detroit, for example, there is a plaque which reads, "In this secluded spot lie the mortal remains of 5,294 persons who, flying from pestilence and famine in Ireland in the year 1847, found in America but a grave." The North Atlantic crossing of the Irish emigrants was not as bad as the middle passage by which black slaves were brought to the United States, but it was bad enough, and those who survived could only look to a slight improvement. In Mrs. Woodham-Smith's words:

> The Irish famine emigration is unlike most other emigrations because it was of a less-civilized and less-skilled people into a more-civilized and more-skilled community. Other immigrations have been of the independent and the sturdy in search of wider horizons, and such emigrants usually brought with them knowledge and technical accomplishment which the inhabitants of the country in which they settled did not possess. The Irish, from their abysmal poverty, brought nothing, and this poverty had forced them to become habituated to standards of living which the populations amongst whom they came considered unfit for human beings. Cellar dwellings, whether in English towns or the cities of North America, were almost invariably occupied by the Irish. Poverty, ignorance and bewilderment brought them there, but it must not be forgotten that cellar dwellings resembled the dark, mud-floored cabins in which over half the population of Ireland had been accustomed to live under British rule.[15]

Many of the ships were called "coffin ships," not inappropriately. For example, the bark *Elizabeth and Sarah* was a small craft of 330 tons and carried 276 people to the promised land across the

14. The Englishmen—Lord Clarendon, Sir Charles Trevelyan, Sir Charles Wood, Mrs. Woodham-Smith, Sir Robert Peel, and Lord Tennyson—are quoted in Costigan, *op. cit.*, pp. 185–187.

15. Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 207.

ocean. It was supposed to have carried twelve thousand gallons of water, but it had only a little more than eight thousand in leaky casks. The captain was required by law to distribute seven pounds of food to each passenger weekly, but no distribution was ever made. There were thirty-six births, thirty-two of which were to be shared among the 276 passengers; there was no sanitary convenience of any kind. The trip took eight weeks, and forty-two persons died during the voyage. The wonder is that more did not succumb.

The Grosse Isle way station in Canada was an incredible center of human misery.

> On May 26 thirty vessels, with 10,000 emigrants on board, were waiting at Grosse Isle; by the 29th there were thirty-six vessels, with 13,000 emigrants. And "in all these vessels cases of fever and dysentery had occurred," wrote Dr. Douglas [medical officer in charge of the station]—the dysentery seems to have been infectious, and was probably bacillary dysentery. On May 31 forty vessels were waiting, extending in a line two miles down the St. Lawrence; about 1,100 cases of fever were on Grosses Isle in shed, tents, and laid in rows in the little church; an equal number were on board the ships, waiting to be taken off; and a further 45,000 emigrants at least were expected.[16]

One ship, the *Agnes,* arrived at Grosse Isle with 427 passengers, of whom only 150 were alive after the fifteen-day quarantine. After the quarantine the emigrants were crammed into steamers for transportation to Montreal, a trip of two or three days during which death claimed up to half of those aboard.

In 1847, 100,000 emigrants left Ireland for Canada. Seventeen thousand, it is estimated, died en route and at least fifty thousand more died in Canada itself. Thousands more died in the United States, but the disaster there was less severe.

It took perhaps a century for Ireland to recover from the effects of the Famine. By the early 1860s the population of the country was close to its 1800 level of four million. Through a combination of late marriage and continued emigration, the population was contained at that level, with only marginal increases or decreases

16. *Ibid.,* p. 220.

for another century. It was only with the economic gains and development plans of the 1960's that sustained population increase began.

The descriptions of the Famine recorded by contemporary observers—corpses lying in the fields, the streets "black with funeral processions," tenant farmers being packed into ships so that the lords would not have to pay poor taxes on them, emaciated men, women, and children struggling down the lanes on their way to death, frantic riots for food, occasional murders of the gentry, and (heaven save us) even a splendid state visit from Queen Victoria—can only begin to give a picture of the unspeakable horrors of such a disaster, one which the British political leadership viewed with some complacency because it helped to solve the problem of overpopulation in Ireland.

Was England guilty of genocide in the 1840s? Surely not in quite the same sense of Adolf Hitler; the British government did not directly execute the victims of starvation and fever. But British political and economic policies made the disaster certain catastrophe, and British leadership viewed the sufferings of the Irish people with little compassion and, in some cases, satisfaction. The mass murder of populations in modern times comparable with that of the famines of the 1840s, such as the liquidation of the Jews and the mass murder of civilians in the Soviet Union before and during the Second World War, did indeed make the Great Famine pale by comparison. There is one big difference, however. Those who managed to live through the extermination camps were hailed as heroes and encouraged by a world that acknowledged the inhumanity of what had happened to them. There was no such solace for the survivors in Ireland or for those who emigrated abroad. The Irish immigrants were unwelcome, unwanted, and despised. Worse than that, their sufferings were tucked under the rug of world history, to be forgotten even by their own descendants. When Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger* was published, the critical reaction was callous. No one, of course, denied the truth of her story or tried to defend the policies of the British government, but precious few reviewers seemed to be aware that there was in the United States a substantial population descended from those

who fled for their lives at the time of the Famine. It is not that Mrs. Woodham-Smith ignores the connection:

> It is a matter of history that the Irish political record has some black spots. Irish emigrants, especially of the famine years, became, with rare exeptions, what their transatlantic environment made them, children of the slums, rebuffed, scorned by respectable citizens and exploited by the less respectable. The Irish were the most unfortunate emigrants and the poorest, they took longest to be accepted, longest to become genuinely assimilated, they waited longest before the opportunities the United States offers were freely available to them.
>
> The story of the Irish in the New World is not a romantic story of liberty and success, but the history of a bitter struggle, as bitter, as painful, though not as long-drawn-out, as the struggle by which the Irish at last won the right to be a nation.[17]

There seems to be a grudging reluctance on the part of American intellectuals to face the horrors of the Famine, the perils of the North Atlantic crossing, and the inhuman experiences of the emigrant Irish. Indeed, one finds precious little compassion for the Irish either in contemporary accounts of the early years of immigration or in present reflections upon those years. I am unaware of a single American intellectual who ever bothered to try to understand the present state of the American Irish in terms of their past experiences. The Irish have never been an approved object of sympathy or understanding in the American republic. It is perhaps just as well, because at this point in time we are capable of declaring ourselves able to do without the intellectuals' compassion, sympathy, and understanding; we made it in spite of their hatred and oppression. There lurks in the Irish psyche, I am convinced, a profound skepticism about the fashionable compassions of the American liberal do-gooder. We are inclined to think their compassions are just a bit phony, and we wonder where they were when we needed their help. We also find it just a bit ironic when they demand that we feel guilty for what their ancestors did to the

17. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

blacks and the American Indians. They do not seem to display much guilt for what happened to us at the hands of their ancestors here and in Europe.

However deeply felt and generally widespread this skepticism toward liberals is among the Irish, any recollection of the famine itself exists, if at all, deep in the unconscious of the American Irish. Many of us had grandparents, many more of us had great-grandparents who fled during those years or shortly thereafter. The story of the Famine, the crossing of the Atlantic and the fever on board ship, and the misery of the slum tenements of New York and Boston are neither part of our family traditions nor of the history we are taught, certainly not in the public schools, nor in the parochial schools. This seems to me to be an astonishing phenomenon. One wonders if by the year 2000, Jews will have forgotten Hitler's extermination camps. That the rest of the world would want to forget is understandable, but that Jews would let them forget it seems very unlikely. Yet the Irish have cooperated, one might almost say enthusiastically, in blotting out the memory of the Great Famine. Perhaps it is too horrible to remember; perhaps we were so eager to become Americans that we quickly shed the memories of a non-American past; perhaps we so wanted to prove ourselves capable of respectability that we thought it expedient to dismiss the injustices which had been visited upon our predecessors. Maybe part of the price of acceptance into American society was that we forget the past. In any case, we have forgotten it.

But that does not mean that its effects do not linger with us. No one would argue that the effects of the slave trade and slavery could be overlooked in an effort to understand American blacks—not even if blacks themselves wanted to forget. There is little difference in the history of the blacks and the Irish until the 1860s. Both lived in abject misery, the victims of political oppression and economic exploitation. The principal difference is that the Irish, having white skins, were eventually given a chance to "earn a place" in American society; the blacks were not permitted to do so. Just as no reasonable student of American blacks can think that the contemporary situation can be understood merely in terms

of what happened since 1865, neither should any serious student of the American Irish assume that their history began at the same time.[18] I am not arguing that the Irish have had it worse than the blacks; most certainly they have not. I am saying something of much more limited import: the past histories of both groups cannot be ignored—even if the groups themselves would prefer to ignore their own histories.

We can conclude this sketchy account of the history of Ireland by saying that whatever comparisons might or might not be made with other groups, the Irish came to this country with a history of a thousand years of misery, suffering, oppression, violence, exploitation, atrocity, and genocide. Their country was given no opportunity to develop intellectually or economically. Their aristocracy was repeatedly liquidated or exiled. Their culture and even their language was systematically eliminated. They were thought of as an inferior people, and like all oppressed peoples began to half believe it themselves. Like all such peoples they were torn between the desire for respectability and savage resentment of their oppressors. If anyone thinks that the twin themes of respectability and resentment are not part of the heritage of the American Irish, he simply does not know the American Irishman very well.

18. A monumental history of Irish Catholicism is being prepared under the direction of Patrick A. Corish of St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Ireland.

3.

The American Irish and the Celtic Heritage

Long, long ago, beyond the misty space
Of twice a thousand years,
In Erin old there dwelt a mighty race,
Taller than Roman spears;
Like oaks and towers they had a giant grace,
Were fleet as deers,
With wind and waves they made their 'biding place,
These western shepherd seers.

Great were their deeds, their passions and their sports;
With clay and stone
They piled on strath and shore those mystic forts,
Nor yet o'erthrown;
On cairn-crowned hills they held their council-courts;
While youths alone,
With giant dogs, explored the elk resorts,
And brought them down.[1]

It has been a long time since Finn MacCool and his band of heroes (or cutthroats, depending on your point of view) roamed the forests with their wolfhounds—a hell of a long time. There is little enough of awareness of the Celtic tradition even in Ireland and practically no awareness of it among the American Irish. And yet when one begins to poke around the ruins of the heritage, one

1. Thomas D'Arcy McGee, "The Celts," in *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse*, ed. Brandan Kennelly (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 253.